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‘These Masses Are What Matter’

On 14 September 1930 our party numbered 293,000 members, and today, on 1 January 1932, it has already gone past 800,000. On 1 January 1931 there were about 100,000 men in our SA and SS organisations; today, on 1 January 1932, well over 300,000. The number of our supporters is right now more than 15 million! It is a procession of victory without parallel in the history of our Volk … Comrades, we march into this year as fighters, in order to leave it as victors. Long live our glorious national socialist fighting movement! Long live our eternally beloved German Volk! Germany awakes!

Hitler’s ‘New Year Declaration’ in the Völkischer Beobachter, 1 January 1932.¹

The worsening economic depression, which led to over 6 million unemployed workers in Germany by the end of 1932, helped to create an atmosphere of social tension and political crisis, which was heightened by a succession of elections. As well as several regional elections, there were in quick succession two ballots for the presidency of the Weimar Republic in March and April 1932, and national elections for the Reichstag in July and November. Almost as important as the feverish campaigning which accompanied these elections were the constant negotiations between politicians, businessmen, generals, and bankers, all directed to the formation of a stable government. A succession of Chancellors, relying increasingly on the support of the President to rule by emergency decree, wrestled with the problems of growing political extremism on the right and the left. Their political intrigues were conducted in an increasingly confrontational atmosphere, where violence became horribly commonplace. Hundreds were killed in rioting and in political murders. Rumours of a Communist revolution, or of an SA ‘march on Berlin’, provoked anxious questions about the stance of the Reichswehr in the event of a complete constitutional breakdown.

Goebbels was not, for the most part, directly involved in these intrigues, which were largely conducted, on behalf of the Nazis, by Hitler’s three other key subordinates, Göring, Röhm, and Gregor Strasser. During 1932, there was a significant shift in the physical centre of power in the Nazi Party, from Munich
to Berlin, as Hitler had to visit the capital much more frequently. He stayed, with his entourage, in the Kaiserhof Hotel, close to the city centre and to Magda Goebbels’ flat in the Reichskanzlerplatz. Here Goebbels was able to exercise a critical influence, often late at night, when Hitler sought relaxation in the company of intimates. Goebbels maintained a consistent position through all the vicissitudes of 1932, advocating a policy of no compromise with other politicians or groups. His personal and political doubts about Göring, Röhm, and Strasser meant that this was an incredibly anxious time for him.

It was in the public sphere of campaigning that Goebbels played a critical role. The propaganda methods which he had been developing in Berlin for six years were now extended to cover all of Germany. Guidelines were issued from the ‘Reich Propaganda Leadership’ for all Party newspapers and speakers, to avoid any public inconsistencies. Der Angriff was now published daily in Berlin and much of northern Germany. Goebbels also edited a satirical illustrated magazine, Der Flammenwerfer (The Flamethrower), and devoted much of his attention to the production of posters, placards, and flyers. Key speeches, mainly by himself and Hitler, were quickly printed as small pamphlets, and for the first time in 1932 issued as records which could be sent to supporters through the post. Goebbels had by now developed a fascination for the possibilities offered by new technologies, and since the production of the first Party Rally film in 1927, he had been involved in the production of other short, silent films. The Völkischer Beobachter in July 1930 had listed five which were available:

1. Reich Party Rally 1927. Duration c. 30 minutes.
2. Reich Party Rally 1929. Duration c. 90 minutes.
4. 1. NS-Pictorial Report with scenes from the funeral of Horst Wessel and from the Relay Berlin-Nuremberg in 1929, from the communal elections in Berlin and pictures of our Reichstag deputies. Duration c.10 minutes.
5. 2. NS-Pictorial Report. Scenes from the SA-Ski Meeting in the Riesengebirge, of the SA-Motor-Storm and of the Hitler Meeting in the Sportpalast in Berlin. Duration c. 15 minutes.2

Goebbels was behind the production of several of these films, the third of which bears the same name as his regular column in Der Angriff. He had observed a special screening of the first three films held for Party members in Berlin in October 1929, but they had failed him as propaganda instruments for two reasons. First, Goebbels was not a technician of film. He had no experience of operating cameras or cutting film, and therefore could only try to influence the shooting and editing from behind the scenes. The films themselves were of an experimental nature, had no soundtrack, and were as yet insufficiently developed in their narrative structure and artistic execution to be as powerful as later productions. Second,